

The Preaching of the Word at **Williamsburg Presbyterian Church**

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

Deliver Us from Evil

The Seventh in a Sermon Series on The Lord's Prayer

The Gospel according to Matthew 6:7-13

The Epistle to the Ephesians 6:10-20

The 6th Sunday of Easter

May 8/9, 2010

The Lord's Prayer concludes with this petition, "rescue us from the evil one" or, as we usually pray: "deliver us from evil." This is the end of the prayer. (Yes, there is all that about "the kingdom, the power and the glory," but we will take that up later in June.)

Portions of the Lord's Prayer challenge us. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive" is difficult, but "deliver us from evil" is simply said. We are thankful for the Lord's Prayer and for Jesus teaching us to pray "deliver us from evil," but if truth be told: we don't need much instruction in order to pray this way.

We remember that well known maxim that there are no atheists in foxholes, and the prayer atheists pray in their foxholes is: "deliver us from evil." From wherever our own foxholes may be we instinctively cry out in fear and need.

There is so much evil and so many kinds of evil and so many forms of evil, and we are so vulnerable and worse yet: the people we love are so vulnerable to all that evil can do to them. The cry "deliver us from evil" escapes our lips unbidden. Those who pray to God and those who pray to no one in particular and those who cry in the darkness shout to the emptiness, "deliver us from evil." Believer and unbeliever have this in common: we fear and we hurt and we live and we die and we don't know what it all means and we shudder in the face of evil. We may not use the words, we may not believe in prayer but we do pray "deliver us from evil."

Deliver us from the car parked at Broadway and 45th and from the twisted mind that put it there.

Deliver us from the stain of oil creeping across our world and from the carelessness that profits from it.

Deliver us from every nation that seeks to establish its reputation and place in the world by nuclear weapons.

Deliver us from the dangers of dangers of armed conflict and from all the horrors that war visits upon our world and our loved ones.¹

¹ Worship at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church begins with several announcements and this weekend Pastor Willson announced that Marine Lieutenant Justin Trowbridge had been wounded in action in Afghanistan and airlifted to Frankfurt.

Deliver us from gigantic threats like asteroids colliding with our planet and from infinitesimally small things like DNA and genes wandering astray and tangling into terrible brokenness.

Deliver us from the shadow on the x-ray and the sound of the doctor's voice as she speaks.

Deliver us from the slow erosion of memory that comes with age and deliver us from those memories we cannot forget or forgive.

Deliver us from depression.

Deliver us from the phone call at 2:00 a.m.

Deliver us from waiting in the emergency room.

Deliver us from pain, the pain that will not be healed and will not cease.

And deliver us too from our own foolishness and corruption, from the evil we do as well as the evil that threatens us.

Deliver us from evil. We pray this way naturally, because we are human, because we are vulnerable. But we cannot sustain this prayer very long. To continue to pray "deliver us from evil" requires a bigger picture, a larger faith and a deeper hope. We can pray "deliver us from evil" day after day, night after night only if we know how to praise God.

Once again we recognize how Jewish the Lord's Prayer is. In the Talmud, the classic commentary on the Law, it is written: "Let a man always declare the praise of God and afterwards present his petition" (B. Berakhot 32a).² It is a judgment not for God's sake but for our sake, for the sake of those who cry out, "Deliver us from evil."

Only those who know how to praise God—"hallowed be your name"—can hold out against disillusionment. It is the very nature of evil to erode our hope, our prayers, our protest against evil. We cry out "deliver us from evil" but without praise and thanksgiving we finally succumb to evil and surrender to it. The Lord's Prayer begins in praise and ends with a cry for help.

This cry of help in the Lord's Prayer is not the desperate wail of the naked human creature who does not know where else to turn, but the audacious assertion of people who have come to know God in praise and thanksgiving. It is a claim on the goodness of God.

"Hallowed be your name," we pray, and "your will be done, on earth as in heaven," and we pray this way because we have been told God's name and because we know that God's will means to overcome evil.

When the LORD reveals God's name to Moses the LORD goes on to explain a holy agenda for human history:

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land (Exodus 3:7-8).

The LORD is a deliverer! We do not pray "deliver us from evil" simply because we know the enormity of evil and we recognize our own fear and need and vulnerability. We pray "deliver us from evil" because reliable sources tell the LORD is in the business of deliverance. God does not give up on people, God does not surrender people, God rescues and frees and releases and delivers people.

² Samuel E. Balentine, "Enthroned on the Praises and Laments of Israel," **The Princeton Seminary Bulletin**, Supplementary Issue Number 2, 1992, p. 27.

Knowing that, we can pray “deliver us from evil” a long time. We can stand against everything evil, everything that diminishes and demeans human life and know God doesn’t want this any more than we do.

Those who pray “hallowed be your name... your will be done,” Jesus also invites to pray “deliver us from evil,” and that may be the most productive way to think about evil. Christian and Jewish theologies have both struggled with the problem of evil. As people of faith we sometimes do not know exactly what to say about evil; we are clearer about what we do not wish to say about evil.

Does God create evil? No, we answer. God created a good creation and blessed it and means still to bless it.

Is evil then just an illusion? No, evil is real, terribly real and it stands against God’s will and good purpose. It stands against us, as the Apostle wrote: “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12)

Does that mean our good God is in continuous battle with an evil counterpart, this Satan, as some people speak of it? No, the Scriptures tell us that Satan is defeated (Luke 10) and held in check by the power of the risen Christ (Romans 8).

Evil is not God’s equal, and while we want to take evil seriously we do not want to take evil so seriously as to distract us from God’s work in Jesus Christ.³ The proper balance we learn in the Lord’s Prayer: ““hallowed be your name... your will be done... deliver us from evil.” Because we know God is our deliverer, because we know the goodness of God’s purposes, then it follows that we pray for deliverance from all that is not God’s goodness. That focuses our faith and nourishes our hope.

It is the nature of evil to destroy trust and hope. Matthew makes that clear in his gospel. You may have noticed that when I read the Lord’s Prayer from the Gospel of Matthew the translation in our pew bibles reads: “do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from **the evil one.**” That is a literal translation of what we customarily pray, “Deliver us from evil.”

The difference is between a neutral evil from a personified evil: “the evil one.” We are apt to hear that literal translation of “the evil one” and think we know exactly who Matthew his talking about: Satan or the devil, Old Scratch.

Before we tell Mr. Matthew what he thinks, however, we might listen to what Matthew wants to tell us about “the evil one.” The fact of the matter is that the phrase “The evil one” never equals Satan in Hebrew or Aramaic literature.”⁴ “The evil one” meant something entirely different in Matthew’s church and has particularly to do with the way we use our words and the reliability of our words.

Only a few verses earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells people they do are not to take oaths but simply, “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37). That’s who “the evil one” is. “The evil one” quibbles; “the evil one” allows a “yes” to slide into a “sometimes,” permits a “no” to become a “maybe.”

³ Many worshippers will recognize this theologem from Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.

⁴ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., **The Gospel According to Saint Matthew**, volume 1, The International Critical Commentary (T & T Clark, 1988), p. 615.

“Oh, yes, we did agree to that some time ago, but things have changed, and our ‘yes’ has changed into a ‘no.’” That hedging of words is the work of “the evil one.”

“The evil one” makes sure we can’t count on what people tell us: the “yes” is not a “yes,” the “no” not a “no.”

Paul writes to the Corinthians explaining: “Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you... was not “Yes and No”; but in him it is always “Yes.” For in [Christ] every one of God’s promises is a “Yes” (1 Cor. 1:19).

God’s word to creation is “Yes,” God’s word to you is “Yes,” God’s word to deliverance from evil is “Yes.” “The evil one” wants to confuse that; don’t be confused. “The evil one” wants to mess with our trust and hope by messing with the message.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew we hear more about “the evil one”: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart” (Matthew 13:19).

“The evil one” snatches away messages of trust and hope so they cannot take root deep in our hearts. “The evil one” does that when someone “hears the word of the kingdom.”

“The word of the kingdom”—isn’t that just hopelessly old-fashioned with kings and kingdoms and all of that hierarchicalism?

“God’s word to you is ‘Yes’”—well, who can really believe in God in a scientific world and isn’t the notion of God speaking rather a primitive anthropomorphism?

“Deliver us from evil”—don’t you think it’s time that we people grow up to understand that we are all by ourselves in this world and there is nothing to deliver us from anything except ourselves?

“The evil one” is at war with God’s truth. The good news is contested territory. For this Sunday I have asked our choir to sing the same version of the 23rd psalm they sang only a few Sundays ago. So many musical arrangements of the 23rd psalm are sweet and sentimental, and this arrangement has its own loveliness, but when it comes to the assertion “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me,” the intensity of the music makes it clear: this is a contested claim that requires being sung firmly, defiantly even, in opposition to everything that would shout it down, including “the evil one.”

“The evil one” would snatch away the word and the hope and the trust that sustains us in “the valley of the shadow of death.” Terrible things happen in “the valley of the shadow of death,” things far more painful and trying than death itself, but we know we are not alone, “thou art with me,” and therefore “I will fear no evil,” and therefore I am given the courage and the strength and the endurance to pray for God’s goodness and mercy, saying, “deliver us from evil.”

Patrick J. Willson
Williamsburg Presbyterian Church
Williamsburg, Virginia

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